

SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH AND 27TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN, 30 OCTOBER 2006, 11.00 AM AT GOLDEN VILLAGE, VIVO CITY

Mr Kenneth Tan, Chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council,
Council members and partners,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

Shift from Dialect Replacement

2 Twenty-seven years ago when the Speak Mandarin Campaign was first launched, it focused on dialect replacement. Today, Singapore is in a different era. The General Household Survey 2005 shows that Mandarin has overtaken Chinese dialects as the predominant home language of the Chinese resident population. The proportion of Mandarin-speaking Chinese has risen to 47 per cent in year 2005, up from 30 per cent in 1990. The proportion who spoke in dialects has correspondingly declined to 24 per cent in 2005, down from 50 per cent in 1990.

Mandarin for Chinese Singaporeans, In addition to English

3 Our message this year is for Singaporean Chinese to use Mandarin not in place of, but in addition to English as Mandarin adds so much to our cultural and personal enrichment and business effectiveness. Together with its partners, the Promote Mandarin Council, is now encouraging Singaporean Chinese to go beyond just seeing Mandarin as hip or cool, but also to deepen their knowledge of the rich heritage.

4 The phenomenal growth of China in the world economy makes it important for anyone wanting to do business in China to have a good grasp of Mandarin, beyond

just a functional competency and language for social chats. This will help us to build relations effectively in business or social settings.

Key Thrusts of Campaign this Year

5 The Speak Mandarin Campaign this year thus focuses on two key thrusts. One is a reminder about the beauty of the Chinese language.

Beauty of the Chinese Language

6 Mandarin can communicate imagery, sound and an understanding of Chinese culture. For example, a few words can convey in a succinct manner the moral of a story, and often in a poetic way. Little did I appreciate this when I was young. My father made me recite the 3-character script ‘三字经’ when I was 4 or 5 years old. (Now there is even an updated (‘新三字经’).) Although he explained the meanings to me, I was like ‘鸭子听, 听不懂’. I could not appreciate the richness of the language then. It was not until I went to primary school and much later that I began to understand better the meaning in some of the sets of 3 Chinese characters. E.g. the 12 words ‘昔孟母, 择邻处。子不学, 断机杼’^{1[1]} tell the

1[1] Explanation - 如果从小不好好教育, 善良的本性就会变坏。为了使人不变坏, 最重要的方法就是要专心一致地去教育孩子。

昔孟母 择邻处 子不学 断机杼 启示: 孟子所以能够成为历史上有名的大学问家, 是和母亲的严格教育分不开的。做为孩子, 要理解这种要求, 是为了使自己成为一个有用的人才。

If a child is not properly educated since young, his good nature will become bad. To prevent a child from going astray, it is most important to educate him with undivided attention. The moral of the story about Mencius' mother moving house thrice and cutting the woven cloth when he played truant is that if not for her strict education, Mencius would not have become a famous man of great learning. A child should realize that his parents have expectations of him because they want him to become a useful person.

story of Mencius' mother moving their home 3 times to prevent her son from mixing with the wrong company. She worked hard to give her son a good environment to study.

7 I was taught parts of another script called the 'thousand words script' ('千字文'). Each set comprises 4 words. It is meant to teach students 1,000 characters, with only 6 of the words being repeated. And yet it is rich in Chinese culture and other matters about life as they were known then. Alas, I was too young to absorb what was taught. The compactness and beauty of the Chinese language can also be expressed in 5 or 7 character couplets, many of which I learnt reading the novels of Jin Yong 金庸 .

8 Chinese poetry shows the beauty of the language in a unique way. For example, "A Tranquil Night" by Li Bai, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, is a beautiful poem that many people can easily recite.

比如,唐朝大诗人李白的‘静夜思’,就是许多人可以琅琅上口的美妙诗歌 :

床前明月光,

疑是地上霜;

举头望明月,

低头思故乡。

Translating the poem into English, it reads :

"Before my bed a pool of light,

I wonder if it is the frost upon the ground.

Looking up, I find the moon bright;

Bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned."

Though the translator tried hard to keep to the meaning of the poem, the essence and the cadence are lost in the translation.

Mandarin in Our Daily Lives

9 The second thrust of the campaign this year is to deepen our command of Mandarin in our daily lives by immersing ourselves in enjoyable activities. We have evolved from "you must speak Mandarin because of this, that, or the other" to "Mandarin is an enjoyable part of your life in all these ways". Mandarin could enrich the lifestyle of Singaporean Chinese, through music, movies and TV, and the creative and versatile use of the language such as in ‘成语’ (idioms).

Keeping the Language Alive

Music

10 This year, our home grown KBox is partnering the Speak Mandarin Campaign and STOMP to promote the learning of Mandarin through songs. I am sure we all know people who could not speak Mandarin but have learnt Mandarin by singing karaoke.

11 We are familiar with SMS, i.e. short message system. Now there is MMS, i.e. multi-media messaging service. STOMP is launching MMS today. Singaporeans could MMS to STOMP video clips of themselves or their friends singing.

Comics

12 In support of this year's campaign, the Lianhe Zaobao has published a comic book featuring significant milestones in Singapore's history. This tongue-in-cheek publication makes serious topics an easy read without trivializing them. When I was young, I found comics a useful way in reading about Chinese classics, like the 'Water Margin' and 'Three Kingdoms'. The pictures were absorbing enough to get me to read more.

Movies and TV

13 Movies and television are also excellent channels for one to enjoy Mandarin. The film clip by Zhaowei Films that will be shown later promotes the language in a delightful way. Whether it is through movies, TV shows or drama series, exposure to the language is part of learning the language.

(Cheng yu) 成语 Cool

14 The Promote Mandarin Council has also enlisted the media companies in this year's campaign. These range from the Straits Times' new ' 成语 Cool ' ('Chengyu Cool') to radio DJs on 93.8Live discussing the 成语 (idiom) the following day and the publication 成语 365 (一天一句) by the Pan Pacific Publishing.

Conclusion

15 The test of whether we have achieved progress in our proficiency in Mandarin is when our people are able to communicate in simple elegant Mandarin that is effective and yet touches the hearts and minds of the people they are communicating with.

16 Let us work hand in hand to help the language grow in its level of usage and competency among Singaporean Chinese.
